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Class, nationalism and news: The BBC's reporting of Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian revolution

ABSTRACT

This article analyses BBC News Online's reporting of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, using a sample from a broader selection of 304 articles published on BBC News Online between 1998 and 2008. Against the BBC's stated commitment to professional values, we find that the BBC's organizational culture is underpinned by a liberal nationalist worldview, which limits its interpretive capacities. The analysis notes that the liberal nationalism underpinning BBC News Online's reporting limits the interpretive capacities of journalists. The ideologically dominant national history of Venezuela (the exceptionalism thesis) forms an interpretive framework, which synchs with the BBC's general conceptualization of the forms and function of a nation state and thus prevents adequate understanding of the present. Consequently, the coverage of contemporary Venezuelan politics masks the underlying class conflict, instead identifying Chavez, who has emerged seemingly from nowhere, as the key agent of political crisis. The BBC's reliance on a narrative of the disruption of national unity allows it to take sides in the conflict whilst apparently remaining neutral.

KEYWORDS

BBC
liberal nationalism
Venezuela
Chavez
ideology

INTRODUCTION

A number of scholars have pointed to the role of media in establishing and maintaining national identity (Morley 2000; Scannell and Cardiff 1991), to the role of national interests in framing foreign reporting (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Nossek 2004) and to appeals to the nation to delegitimize certain political movements as partial (Glasgow University Media Group 1976; Kumar 2005; Schlesinger 1991). These studies show that although it is clear that journalists do have relative autonomy in many respects, this autonomy works within a broader interpretive framework, or reportorial language, that is shared by the audience. In this sense, nationalism and the nation state are common-sense realities that constitute a shared frame of reference between most journalists and audiences and institutionalized in news organizations. Here we consider a particular form of nationalism, which we refer to as a particularly western 'liberal nationalism' (see Canovan 1996; Miller 1995; Tamir 1993). This refers to an ideology in which nationally based liberal institutions are considered to serve the nation as a whole rather than one class and in which (an assumed) national unity should be preserved.

Here we look at how the BBC News Online's reporting of Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela between 1998 and 2008 employs a liberal nationalist framework that allows BBC journalists to frame the situation without recourse to political debate, and allows them to take sides without appearing to do so explicitly. Insofar as there are different, competing narratives, we find that they are structured in such a way as to give discursive preference to 'the nation', represented by 'the opposition', whose class basis is unrecognized. In this sense, the dominant class interests of the Venezuelan 'nation' are used to frame the Bolivarian revolution, without, of course, stating this class basis explicitly. We find that appeals to national unity, and the emphasis on disruption and threat to national unity, seem to override other concerns, structuring the overall narrative as one in which an external threat (Chavez) misleads Venezuelans to misunderstand their real (national) interests.

In the broader study from which this article is drawn, an analysis of a larger collection of 304 articles published on the BBC News Online website between 1998 (when Chavez was first elected) and 2008 (the beginning of the study) was used to get a sense of the overall balance of articles. We gathered the articles by using the BBC's own search engine, searching for 'Venezuela', and then augmenting this with a Google search: 'Venezuela site: news.bbc.co.uk'. We then manually collated the articles to exclude those with only minor mentions, for example, if Venezuela was merely mentioned as being present at a meeting. Here we undertake a close textual analysis of a sample of articles drawn from the larger study. Here we are interested in how BBC News Online communicate their understanding of the social, economic and political divisions that frame Venezuelan politics. We were especially interested in the significance of these divisions as explanatory factors in understanding support for and opposition to the Bolivarian Government of Venezuela, for example whether there would be any recognition of class, how it would be framed, how evident divisions are dealt with and what the causes are said to be. The ways in which this division is recognized and dealt with can help illustrate ideological tendencies in the BBC's news reporting.

MEDIA AND NATIONALISM

Here liberal nationalism is conceptualized as an ideological trope that transcends all particular interests. The nation itself stands above particularity yet masks the conditions under which it exists, such as class rule, class

struggle and the artificiality of the traditions, customs and institutions through which it is identified, as well as the mythological status of its official history (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

Nationalism is partially sustained through media institutions and discourses (Anderson 1991; Billig 1995; Smith 1991). As Morley (2000: 107) put it, national broadcasting systems create a sense of unity and mass experience in a population. Despite the supposed globalization of culture and media, mainstream media remain crucial supports for national identity (Price 1995; Schlesinger 1991; Smith 1991), national frames of reference remain strong and the perspective of the home state continues to be shared by national and international news media (Hallin 1992; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Nossek 2004; Waisbord 2002).

A number of studies looking specifically at social and political conflicts in western liberal democracies have identified nationalist frameworks that operate to construct 'the nation' as an entity that is threatened by sections of the population – the slum dwellers – who stand outside acceptable norms of bureaucratically constrained political behaviour (Fishman and Marvin 2003; Hall et al. 1978; Hallam and Street 2000; Schlesinger 1991: Chapter 5), especially in the realm of industrial conflict (Glasgow University Media Group 1976; Kitch 2007; Kumar 2005). Nationalism has been shown to have a conservative function in responding to outbreaks of industrial action, whereby particular interests operate through universalizing appeals (Kumar 2005). Thus we see the conflation of dominant class interests with national interests, which means that those who challenge dominant class interests come to be considered as enemies of the national interest. It is in this respect that Gluckstein (1999) noted the tendency of the 1930s fascist ideology to frame Marxists as enemies of the 'national community', as 'treacherous murderers of the nation' and a 'pestilence' with a hold on 'the nation's neck', stoking class conflict. More recently Pan, Lee, Chan et al. (2001) pointed to the obfuscation of political conflict under the narrative of the 'family-nation', based around the interests of the capitalist class. It is this invocation of harmony within the national family that enables corporate media to take the side of the owners without appearing biased.

THE BBC: CLASS AND NATION

The BBC is widely recognized as an important news organization whose journalism is based on accuracy, independence and impartiality. Indeed, the government 'Agreement' on which the BBC's existence is based stipulates that the BBC Trust should 'seek to ensure that the BBC gives information about, and increases understanding of, the world through accurate and impartial news, other information, and analysis of current events and ideas' (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2006: 3).

The BBC's Editorial Guidelines make this commitment more thoroughly. According to the Guidelines, BBC News should 'strive to be accurate and establish the truth of what has happened' and 'weigh all relevant facts and information to get at the truth'. BBC News should 'be honest and open about what we don't know and avoid unfounded speculation'. BBC News should also 'strive to be fair and open minded and reflect all significant strands of opinion by exploring the range and conflict of views'. Furthermore it commits BBC News to being 'objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. We will provide professional judgments where

appropriate, but we will never promote a particular view on controversial matters of public policy, or political or industrial controversy'. Finally, it asserts BBC News's independence from 'both state and partisan interests' (BBC 2005: 7).

Despite this context, the BBC is a site of discourse, marked by these institutional arrangements, its 'news culture' (Allan 2004), its interfaces with other institutions and broader hegemonic systems of representation. From its inception, one of the key roles for the BBC was to engage a national framework for the interpretation of events. The BBC was thus an institutional site of discourse through which knowledge of the world would be structured. As with any other institution, its processes of recruitment and socialization draw staff who share those institutional goals, which then form part of the embodied institutional culture.

The BBC *has* changed significantly over time, as did the deeply entrenched dominant class hegemony, yet its news culture retains much of the Reithian culture, especially in respect of the dominant conception of the nation (outside hard news, the BBC has diversified to embrace a broad conception of the nation, yet it is still marked by particularly liberal nationalist values). A number of scholars have noted the central role played by BBC News in establishing a broad and flexible national identity within the United Kingdom, anchored in dominant class interests that seem to belie its professional commitments (Williams 1974: 33–34; see also Briggs 1986; Scannell and Cardiff 1991). Philo (1995) and Creeber (2004) also note the strong consensual orientation that masked class control in the early days of the BBC, which carried on in less explicit form throughout the twentieth century.

The subtlety of institutionalized discourse, and the more recent pluralization of Britishness (which includes the BBC transforming its recruitment processes to draw from a broader range of ethnic and class backgrounds), has not meant that the core understanding of the nation as a good and necessary entity has disappeared. Class and group fractions are still largely overcome in news discourses, the good of the nation is prioritized over class struggle (especially during industrial disputes) and dominant historical narratives still bind a diverse population around the 'we', and still largely revolve around elite history and feed into dominant interpretive frameworks.

The general class bias in elite journalism is shown in the findings of the Sutton Trust's (2006) research. The proportion of the top 100 journalists who attended private schools has risen over the past twenty years, from 49 per cent in 1986 to 54 per cent in 2006, and the proportion who had attended either Oxford or Cambridge University remains around half. Of the BBC journalists included in the report, more than half attended Oxford or Cambridge. The liberal nationalist tendencies of BBC journalists can be observed in media outputs of key correspondents such as Cambridge-educated Jeremy Paxman's (1999) book *The English*, Cambridge-educated Andrew Marr's television programmes *History of Modern Britain* (2007) and *Britain from Above* (2008) and television programmes by Oxford-educated Peter Snow's *Battlefield Britain* (2004) and Oxford-educated David Dimbleby's *A Picture of Britain* (2005) and *How We Built Britain* (2007). As Steve Pope (1999: 57) puts it, 'White middle-class men dominate the national media, and it has to be said that the interests and culture of this group manifest themselves not only in the news agenda but also in how these stories are written'.

The class-based liberal nationalism underpinning BBC reporting is sometimes explicitly recognized, as when a government minister commented on the BBC's reporting on strikes in the 1970s:

No obligation of impartiality could absolve the broadcasting services from exercising their editorial judgement [...] within the context of the values and objectives of the society they are there to serve. The BBC have as trustees for the public to judge not only what is best in news terms, but what is in the national interest.

(cited in Garnham 1978: 19)

More recently, where there has been increasing diversity, it has actually been incorporated into a reformulated nationalism (Curran 2002). It is precisely diversity, tolerance and pluralism that become (ideologically) constitutive of Britishness. Nationalism thus remains a core value of the BBC, and the role of broadcasting in the construction and maintenance of the 'national family' remains crucial for domestic news (Cardiff and Scannell 1987; Morley 2004), but we show that the notion of a class-blind 'national family' also pervades reporting of news abroad.

In this sense, official histories have strong class-based ideological underpinnings, as demonstrated by Marxist historians (Thompson 1980; Williams 1961). Indeed, the narrowness of official histories drawn upon by the BBC in news and documentaries, and their mythical-ideological underpinning, has been criticized in a number of studies (Chapman 2007; Harrison 2007; Philo and Berry 2004; Qing 2007).

Here we argue that if liberal nationalism is ingrained into the culture of the BBC, then the interpretive framework employed by correspondents will ignore or downplay the fragmented class basis of a political order, wherein deviations from a consensus-oriented, liberal nationalism become incomprehensible. In this sense, the Bolivarian revolution would be understood as resulting not from legitimate and constructive class conflict, but from wanton destruction aimed at the heart of the national family of Venezuela. Indeed, rather than following Pan, Lee, Chan et al. (2001), in identifying a situation in which conflict is obscured under the family-nation, we identify a situation in Venezuela where the nationalist viewpoint is drawn out through explicit reporting of political 'polarization'. In this sense, we suggest that appeals to national unity, grounded in a particular historical narrative, allow journalists to appear neutral by foregrounding the interests of 'the nation' without expressly articulating them beyond the maintenance of a mythologized stability and national unity facilitated by liberal democratic institutions. This is to say that a particular traditionally established nationalism allows a dominant ideology to be expressed indirectly, and against which class-based political, social and economic conflicts are to be neutralized as alien and unnatural.

Of course, the actual process of newsgathering impacts on the media construction of events, and it is clear from discussions with BBC correspondents that local stringers and other journalists in Caracas have a significant influence on the interpretation of events. Documents released by Wikileaks (2011) and in Golinger's (2007) study show clear and sustained collaboration between 'the opposition', commercial media and the US government in opposing the Venezuelan government. It is within this milieu that BBC correspondents live and work, and with all of the normal economic and social

constraints on newsgathering, sense can be made of how they become aligned with certain discourses on Venezuela.

NATIONAL HISTORY AND REPORTORIAL FRAME: THE MYTH OF VENEZUELAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE RISE OF THE BOLIVARIAN MOVEMENT IN VENEZUELA

As Philo and Berry (2004) demonstrate, the selection of a particular historical narrative of a situation greatly affects reportorial frames, forming part of the thematic framework. The selection may be influenced by dominant sources, accepted 'official histories' or, as we suspect in the current situation, class experience. In addition to 'presence', reporting is influenced by 'absence' – in this instance, the absence of class as a determining factor or material experience.

For example, BBC News Online's interpretive framework appears to depend on a particular historical narrative that is shared by the Venezuelan elite: a narrative of a stable national tradition of democracy that sets Venezuela apart from its neighbours and largely ignores the centrality of class conflict in Venezuelan history. At the same time, there is an absence of recognition of the class experience of the vast majority of Venezuelans.

This clear in its early reporting, BBC News provides the frame for later reports. The background provided in 'Venezuela's democratic record' (7 December 1998) argues that 'Venezuela is proud of its democratic record' and that 'many in his own country' see Chavez as representing 'a retrograde step to the region's past, where autocratic military leaders wielded personal power for their own ends'. The BBC understands the history of Venezuelan democracy as an exception in the 'region', and that its democratic record is a source of national pride for the *nation* as a whole.

That Chavez stands outside this national tradition of democracy and poses a threat to it is identified very early on in the BBC's reporting. In 1999 'Venezuela's dictatorship' (31 August 1999), written by 'an assembly member Jorge Olavarria', a former Chavista, outlined this threat. The BBC reported that in Chavez's Venezuela 'there is no such thing as the rule of law. There is a dictatorship through the Constitutional Assembly which is completely at the service of President Chavez' and allows Olavarria to make an unopposed analogy to Hitler. At the outset, Chavez is identified as a demagogue, with the Hitler analogy placing him as an outsider, foreign to Venezuela's national tradition of democracy.

However, researchers have identified the history that the BBC relies on as a myth. Whereas the BBC paints a picture of a stable, unified, effective democratic system that is disrupted by the arrival of Chavez, historical research paints a different picture. On this account Venezuela was far from a unified, stable system before Chavez. Ellner and Salas explain that those who refer to the exceptionalism of Venezuela,

[f]ailed [...] to draw the connection between political exclusion and the related phenomena of clientelism, on one hand, and the violation of human rights, electoral manipulation, and corruption, on the other [...] they took the legitimacy of the institutional mechanisms that guaranteed stability for granted. The same defects of electoral fraud, corruption, and repression that scholars pointed to as contributing to the crisis of the 1990s had been apparent in previous decades.

(Ellner and Salas 2005: 11)

María García-Guadilla (2005: 112) concurs, explaining that the inadequacy of the exceptionalism thesis is illuminated by factors stretching into the history of Venezuela. She explains that '[t]he notions of the exceptionalism of Venezuelan democracy and civil society overlooked the socioeconomic and political-ideological polarization that had been under way since the 1960s' (see also O'Coker 1999).

As with the rest of Latin America, Venezuela has been marked by extreme poverty set against a narrowly constituted elite of 5–10 per cent of the population (Hoffman and Centeno 2003). Although Venezuela has not historically suffered the levels of poverty that have afflicted much of the rest of the continent, between 1975 and 1995 poverty increased dramatically, with the percentage of persons living in poverty rising from 33 per cent to 70 per cent during that period. The number of households in poverty increased from 15 per cent to 45 per cent between 1975 and 1995. By 2000 wages had dropped 40 per cent from their 1980 levels. Wilpert explains that 'other poverty measures [...] are lower, but all of them paint a picture of a large increase in poverty over the past 25 years' (Wilpert 2007: 108). Indeed, by 1997 a total of 67 per cent of Venezuelans earned less than \$2 a day (Buxton 2004: 113). In contrast, as Sylvia and Danopoulos (2003: 65) explain, 'Weekend shopping trips to Miami were the order of the day for the bourgeois classes. The oil riches, however, did not trickle down to the bottom of Venezuelan society. A sizeable portion of Venezuela's population remained desperately poor'.

In the 1980s and 1990s, spontaneous popular demonstrations, strikes and riots erupted in response to these deep-rooted political, social and economic conflicts (Hillman 1994; McCoy 1995; O'Coker 1999), and against what Hillman (1994) refers to as 'democracy for the privileged', or what Sylvia and Danopoulos (2003: 64) call 'subsidized democracy', and its policy outcomes, specifically the acceptance of the Washington Consensus (Gott 2005). The recognition of long-standing, deep-rooted political, social and economic conflict has been said to shatter the myths regarding Venezuela's supposedly unique social, economic and political stability (Ellner 1997; Ellner and Salas 2005). However, neither the BBC's reports nor its contextual reports attribute significance to these events. Also the reports from the period studied do not mention the Caracazo massacre of, at the very least, 400 (up to 3000) protesters and students railing against IMF (International Monetary Fund) austerity measures in 1989 (Hardy 2007: 29), the same year as blanket coverage was given to the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Despite the centrality of class in Venezuela, the BBC explains the election of Chavez as something that cannot be easily understood. Indeed, this lack of understanding is comprehensible only if we understand Chavez as a decontextualized individual demagogue battling against Venezuela's proud national tradition of democracy (Sanoja 2007), that is, only if we ignore the class dynamic behind him. With deeper consideration of Venezuelan history, we can see that Chavez is merely the figurehead of a movement that responded to political and economic crises.

As Lander (2005) points out, it was the crises that made possible the rise of Chavez and the wider Bolivarian movement. Indeed, civil society organizations and social movements grew as the oligarchic political parties became increasingly corrupt, nepotistic and detached from ordinary people, the democratic basis for the Bolivarian movement (McCoy 1995). Though the early Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement was centred on the Venezuelan military, it depended on alliances with other civilian social movements, such as Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), as well as on popular support (Gott 2005;

Sanoja 2007). By the late 1990s, the movement had caught the imagination of the masses and was no longer a vanguard movement.

It was the 'underclass' in the barrios that moved to support Chavez, which has provided the core support for Chavez and consolidation of the revolution. Whereas the organized working class had been integrated in the old political system, the urban poor had been continually excluded from all social, political, cultural and economic spheres. But as the organized working class had suffered from the neoliberalism imposed in the 1990s, so their support for the old system dwindled as support moved to Chavez, thus accounting for the consistent support of 55–60 per cent of the population.

Having been unsuccessful in leading Bolivarian coup attempts in 1989 and 1992, Hugo Chavez was elected as the president of Venezuela for the first time in 1998 with 56 per cent of the vote. His proposed constitution was passed in 1999 with 72 per cent of the vote. Chavez was re-elected in 2000 with 60 per cent of the vote, and although the main observer, the Carter Center, found that there were faults with the electoral process, including a lack of transparency, it stated that 'the majority of Venezuelans continued to support the radical reform program of President Hugo Chávez through five more elections and referenda' since 1998 and that 'the presidential election legitimately expressed the will of the people' (Neuman and McCoy 2001: 10). In 2004 Chavez won a recall vote, called by 'the opposition', which utilized provisions in the Bolivarian constitution, with 59 per cent of the vote. The result was confirmed by the Carter Center, though the European Union refused to observe because of what it regarded as unreasonable restrictions on its observation. Chavez was most recently re-elected in a general election of 2006, which he won with 63 per cent of the vote. The result was confirmed by the Organization of American States, the European Union, Mercosor (the South American free-trade zone) and again the Carter Center. Chavez lost a referendum for a new constitution in 2007 by 51 per cent to 49 per cent. Thereafter the Bolivarian party was, outside Caracas, the biggest party of regional elections in 2008, won a 2009 constitutional referendum and Chavez's remained the biggest party in Parliament after the 2010 national elections. To set Chavez's democratic support in perspective, victorious parties in UK elections since 1979 have achieved between 35.3 per cent and 43.9 per cent of the vote.

Despite massive popular support, from the outset the BBC framed Chavez's election as a possible threat to a rightful order (see below). For example, reporting after the 2002 coup, the BBC explains that 'the impact of Mr Chavez's "Bolivarian revolution" on Venezuela's institutional framework will prove harder to reverse', which implies that Bolivarian institutions are not 'Venezuelan' and that reforms ought to be reversed because of their alien nature ('Venezuela's political disarray', 12 April 2002). In this case BBC News Online's interpretive framework not only seems to ignore a class-fractured history of political and social conflict but also removes the context through which the rise of the Bolivarian movement is comprehensible. By 2007, the BBC's Q&A on the referendum tries to offer an 'explanation' for Chavez's election, asking, 'Why does President Chavez have such a strong political base?' (Extract 9 below). The article recognizes Chavez's assertions about the previous two-party system being 'oligarchic', but gives no context for public dissatisfaction relating to human rights abuses, poverty, political corruption, the Caracazo Massacre, IMF austerity measures and so on. Furthermore it presents the 'destruction' of the two-party system as the result of Chavez's

will, rather than resulting from a democratic mandate confirmed by a constitutional referendum supported by more than 70 per cent of the population.

‘THE OPPOSITION’ AS DEFENDERS OF THE NATION

The shortcomings of the BBC’s understanding of the past, and its ignorance of class, operate not just to delegitimize Chavez but also to legitimize ‘the opposition’ as the true defenders of the once-harmonious Venezuelan nation and its democratic tradition. It also serves to signify a unified source of democratic resistance rather than a politically fractured class-bound set of groups coalescing around the old political and economic elite.

‘Opposition in Venezuela warning’ (12 April 1999) reports that ‘Opposition leaders in Venezuela have appealed to the international community to intervene to protect democratic rule’. The article ‘Sweeping powers for Venezuelan assembly’ (13 August 1999) describes the fears of ‘critics’ that constitutional reforms would end in ‘pseudo-democracy’ and autocracy, leaving the last paragraph to Chavez to retort that he aims to create a ‘truly democratic institution’. In ‘Chavez opponents face tough times’ (6 December 2005) the US state department, ‘opposition politicians’ and ‘experts’ berate Chavez’s reforms – he is described as acting ‘like a totalitarian autocrat’; it is claimed that he ‘uses parliament as a fig leaf of democracy’, and closes off ‘democratic spaces in the Venezuelan state’. Although the BBC does report an expert’s opinion that ‘As the conventional understanding of democratic governance diminishes, there is a lot more social democratisation than ever before’, it sits uneasily in a framework in which democracy is understood in terms of its proximity to the United Kingdom’s Westminster model. Furthermore, the BBC’s own correspondent ends by suggesting that ‘Mr Chavez will make an effort to *appear* more tolerant towards political opposition since a clause in the Mercosur agreement binds member states to uphold democracy’ (emphasis added), which seems to indicate that the opposition are the real source of democracy. Whereas the national Parliament did lose power under Chavez, it did not necessarily mean that there was a reduction of democracy. Rather, the Parliament was seen to have served the oligarchy, sustaining the cosy relations fostered by the old two-party system. It was for this reason that the Chavez government proposed in the constitution to devolve power down to local communities, a proposal that has been an important aspect of participatory and direct democratic theory (Pateman 1970) and practice. If the BBC idealizes democracy as the limited paradigm of an adversarial two-party system (which Venezuela had before Chavez), then it is unsurprising that the elite rhetoric over the reform of the political system that served them as undemocratic fits BBC frames.

Whilst the BBC invests legitimacy in ‘the opposition’, Garcia-Guadilla (2005: 117–20) explains that on occasion the ‘social organizations of the opposition and the popular sectors have locked themselves into alliances with political parties, however discredited and delegitimized’. On other occasions, those organizations have usurped the old parties, and the subsequent power vacuum has led ‘social organizations of the opposition to look to the military and has stimulated undemocratic civilian-military alliances’. Ultimately Garcia-Guadilla explains the ‘opposition’ organizations as corrupt, class-interested and often undemocratic in structure and action.

The key ‘civilian-military alliance’ was manifested in the coup that took place against the elected government on 11 April 2002, which Eva Golinger’s (2007) study shows was backed, at least rhetorically, by the US government as

part of a broader policy of destabilization and overthrow of the government. The coup leaders – made up of business leaders, politicians of the old regime and the military— overthrew Chavez for a couple of days before a popular uprising of the poor, workers and the broad Bolivarian movement returned him to his elected position.

The coup was at no point framed with reference to the tradition of US usurpation of democratically elected governments in Latin America and around the world (Agee 1975; Brody 1985; Chomsky 1992; Chomsky and Herman 1979a, 1979b; Herman and Chomsky 1988). Rather, the mythical role of ‘the opposition’ in defending the national tradition of democracy provided a background for reporting the coup. BBC News published nine articles on the coup on 12 April 2002, all of which were based on the version of events of the coup leaders, who were, alongside the ‘opposition’, championed as saviours of the nation.

Although BBC News did report the coup, the only time it mentioned the word ‘coup’ was as an allegation of government officials and of Chavez’s daughter, who, alongside ‘Cuba’, were the only voices opposed to the coup. The BBC’s explanation was that Chavez ‘fell’, ‘quit’ or ‘resigned’ (at best at the behest of the military) after his ‘mishandling’ of strikes (which, as Hardy [2007] reminds us, were actually management lockouts) and demonstrations in which his supporters had fired on and killed protestors. ‘Oil prices fall as Chavez quits’ explains that Chavez quit as a result of a ‘popular uprising’. We are told in ‘Venezuela to hold elections within a year’ that ‘Mr Chavez, who resigned after a three-day general strike in protest against his policies ended in violence ...’ (12 April 2002). In reporting this latter, Adam Easton, the BBC’s correspondent in Caracas, wrote, ‘Film footage also caught armed supporters of Mr Chavez firing indiscriminately at the marchers’ (‘Venezuela’s new dawn’). The footage in question was broadcast by an oligarch’s channel that had supported the coup and is now known to have been manipulated.

In ‘Venezuela’s political disarray’ (12 April 2002) the coup was framed as a ‘restoration’ of democracy, with the subheading ‘Restoring democracy’ – again drawing on the exceptionalism of pre-Chavez Venezuela. The seizure of power by Pedro Carmona was described thus: ‘In forming a transitional government Venezuela has looked not to an existing politician but to the head of the business leaders’ association’. We see here that the small class of the military and business elite that led the coup *is* Venezuela.

Given that Chavez won two elections and a constitutional referendum prior to the coup, it is surprising that the BBC gave discursive privilege to the coup leaders. The democratic intentions of the coup leaders were unquestioned. In ‘Venezuelan media: “It’s over!”’ the BBC allowed the editor of El Universal to declare unopposed, ‘We have returned once again to democracy!’ To further demonstrate the indigenous nature of the ‘unrest’ against the exogenous threat that is Chavez, all of the vox pops used in the nine articles were from ‘opposition’ supporters. It is therefore reasonable to infer that ordinary Venezuelans did not support Chavez, and that whilst the coup was ‘popular’, the counter coup was not.

CHAVEZ AS THE AGENT OF POLARIZATION

Despite Chavez’s democratic mandate, he is constructed by the BBC not just as an outsider, but as having been the *agent* of ‘polarization’ or ‘division’ within the Venezuelan nation. Below is a selection of passages that illustrate this.

Extract 1

Correspondents say Venezuela has been bitterly *polarised by* more than five years of Mr Chavez.

(‘Venezuela army officers arrested’, 9 July 2004,
emphasis added)

Extract 2

Controversial figure

Since first coming to power in 1998, Mr Chavez *has polarised* public opinion in Venezuela.

(‘Marathon vote ends in Venezuela’, 15 August 2004,
emphasis added)

Extract 3

Venezuela was *polarised by* the surprise victory of Mr Chavez – Venezuela’s first president from an indigenous heritage – in presidential elections in 1998.

(‘Chavez claims referendum victory’, 16 August 2004,
emphasis added)

Extract 4

The political *divide* in Venezuela is enormous and the decision not to renew a licence for an opposition-aligned television station is exactly the sort of issue that widens that rift.

(‘TV row widens Venezuela’s rift’, 25 May 2007,
emphasis added)

Extract 5

The question now is whether the president will try and bridge the deep *divide* that has *emerged* in Venezuela *in the last few years*, or whether he will take advantage of their [i.e. the opposition’s] weakness to pursue his own agenda even more aggressively.

(‘Analysis: Venezuela at a crossroads’, 17 August 2004,
emphasis added)

Extract 6

‘I invite my countrymen to talk, even to my most bitter enemies I offer my hand,’ said Hugo Chavez, whose populist policies *have split* Venezuelan opinion.

(‘Chavez tells foes “accept defeat”’, 21 August 2004,
emphasis added)

Extract 7

Whoever wins the election will have to try to unite a deeply *divided* country or face much political instability, the BBC’s Greg Morsbach reports from Caracas.

(‘Polls close in Venezuela election’,
4 December 2006, emphasis added)

Extract 8

It will take even longer to *heal the divisions* which have emerged in the last few years. That could take a generation.

(‘Crunch time for Venezuelans’, 14 August 2004,
emphasis added)

The implication then is that prior to Chavez's presidency the country was not 'deeply divided' (Extract 7) and that social division reflects a subjectively felt anomaly, disrupting a usually united nation. At times this is explicit in the reference to 'Venezuelan opinion' or 'public opinion' being 'split', and to the country having been '*bitterly* polarised'. In other words, it does not refer to actual material, class 'division' or inequality, but to something of recent origin that can be 'healed' (Extract 8), and so unity regained without recourse to transformation in the material domain. The subjective experience remains, even if felt 'deeply', a superficial division, with the nation remaining essentially united.

BBC News Online's adherence to a dominant, class-bound historical narrative leaves its journalists purblind to class division, leaving Chavez as the exogenous 'cause' of the subjective 'rift' (Extract 4). Rather than the figure of Chavez organically emerging out of the process of 'polarisation', thereby coming to symbolize and lead the mass movement, Extract 3 suggests it was merely the single discrete event of his 'victory' in the election – as opposed even to the election *process* which climaxed in the victory – which 'polarised' Venezuela. The relevant image here is of the triggering of the divergent preferences of two groups of passive consumers in response to an option already chosen by an independent process over which they have no control.

But if Chavez is represented as lacking organic roots and if his democratic legitimacy is questionable, how is his rise and indeed continuing mass support to be explained? One answer is to simply suggest that this rise is a mystery, with the president's ascendancy being presented as a sort of bolt from the blue. Thus there is reference to his 'surprise victory' in the 1998 elections (Extract 4), and the 2004 referendum result is referred to as 'an extraordinary turn around, and one that defies easy explanation' ('Analysis: Venezuela at the crossroads', 17 August 2004). The institutional ignorance of working-class experience in Venezuela leaves the journalist lost. Chavez's supporters did not appear as significant rational actors in the BBC's reporting.

However, at times it appears that we are promised a more organic picture of Chavez's ascendancy. In an article entitled 'Q&A: Venezuela's referendum' (30 November 2007) the final section reads as follows:

Extract 9

Why does President Chavez have such a strong political base?

From 1958 until 1998, Venezuela was dominated by two major parties, the centre-right Christian Democratic Party (Copei) and the centre-left Democratic Action (AD).

After his victory in the 1998 election, Mr Chavez, who had previously tried to take control of the country in a failed military coup in 1992, set out to destroy this two-party system, which he described as oligarchic.

President Chavez has been working to set up a socialist republic by reforming the political and social systems.

He has nationalised key industries, such as telecommunications and electricity. He has also increased government control of oil and gas sectors.

He has invested millions of dollars from Venezuela's oil revenues into social projects.

Since 2003, he has maintained a strict price regime on some basic foods like coffee, beans, sugar and powdered milk. This measure was designed to curb inflation, but it has also led to shortages of staple foods.

Today Venezuelan politics is divided between a pro- and an anti-Chavez camp. His supporters say he has given a political voice to millions of poor Venezuelans who were disregarded by the 'traditional' political parties.

His opponents describe him as a populist who is looking to entrench himself in power.

The BBC's attempt to contextualize fails to account for any sense of conflict, class based or otherwise, that might explain the rise of the Bolivarian movement. Rather, the passage as a whole presents a picture of Chavez as an autonomous agent, and of the 'divided' political scene as exclusively a product of his reforming will. There is a punctual beginning following the unexplained 'victory in the 1998 election'. Omitting any of the history of struggle from below, we abruptly find ourselves in the situation '[t]oday', when 'Venezuelan politics is divided between a pro- and an anti-Chavez camp'. It again seems that instead of a material basis to the division, in terms of underlying class cleavage, the picture is of divergent free-floating preferences, that is, between 'supporters' and 'opponents'. It is not actually said that those who might benefit most from the reforms – such as the 'millions of poor Venezuelans' – form his base of 'supporters'. The extent to which such reforms have really benefited one side rather than another is qualified in that his 'strict price regime' 'has also led to shortages of staple foods'. This point will be returned to below. There is rarely a significant recognition of the proportion of 'poor', or 'supporters' or 'opponents'. Rather there appears to be a reasonable 50/50 division between those who 'support' without showing explicitly that they might be active agents who benefit from the revolution, as opposed to his 'opponents' who may have as strong anti-democratic class interest. The visual imagery used often feeds into this narrative. 'Crunch times for Venezuelans' (14 August 2004) presents two photographs to represent 'supporters' and 'opponents'. The former are represented by five children queuing at a doorway with the caption 'Chavez has spent millions on social measures such as soup kitchens', from which it is not unreasonable to suggest a reading, given the context, that few actually benefit, that they are young and impressionable and that perhaps 'millions' is too much for soup, as well as the historical significance of 'soup kitchens'. The 'opposition' is represented by an aerial photograph of thousands (seemingly hundreds of thousands) of people marching through Caracas with the caption 'The opposition has been trying to get rid of Chavez for years'.

DIVISION, NON-NATION AND RATIONAL UNITY

Associated with the focus on symptoms is the message running through the reporting of the (non-class) divide itself as existing for no good reason outside Chavez's desire, as if division for the sake of division, and so purely destructive. The liberal nationalist viewpoint cannot understand why members of a nation who are bound by their sense of collective identity could be involved in conflict. Without consideration of class fracture, the situation remains incomprehensible.

At times (Extract 8), divisions are metaphorically represented as an illness within the national body (cf. Perry 1983). The force of the recurrent foregrounding of emotional 'polarisation' and 'division' is to suggest the opposite to a dynamic socially transformative conflict: they mark a national paralysis. As one article puts it, 'Venezuela [...] has been mired in political conflict and an economic tailspin *since* President Chavez was briefly deposed in April's coup' ('Talks begin in troubled Venezuela', 8 November 2002, emphasis added). To elaborate on this we can note the operation of the 'apophatic method' (Medvedev and Bakhtin 1978), which refers to the characterization of something – in this case 'polarisation' – negatively in terms of what it is not; that is, by means of 'bare negation' and of dissimilarity to something else. Thus, rather than having any independent positive historical content to it, 'polarisation' represents simply negation of national unity. 'Venezuela's rift' represents nothing other than the 'non-nation'.

'Polarisation', as non-nation, simultaneously includes nation. The 'deeper' the 'polarization', the more underlying national unity can be affirmed as an *a priori* and inherent reality. Things are thus turned on their head. Division, conceived as subjective, is presented as externally imposed on the naturalized nation, rather than nation itself resembling an imposed mystical veil that shrouds class conflict. So rather than real independent class conflict involving the exposure of national unity as bourgeois mystification which works to veil an inherent conflict of interests, what seems to be anti-nation, destroying unity, here in fact ends up at the same time affirming national unity.

This same contradictory pattern at times manifests in a more concrete fashion in the reports. The portrayal of Chavez as autonomous and floating above the class divide includes the suggestion that despite having 'supporters' who are occasionally recognized as coming from impoverished backgrounds, the threat he poses extends to the entire population, regardless of class. This in turn involves the reports adopting a transcendent universal standpoint in the interests of the nation as a whole conceived as a class-neutral category. Chavez divides in a way which brings people together, as a result of the consequent shared hardship, which indicates the basic irrationality of political struggle as something which only devastates. As a result, it is 'othered' as un-Venezuelan (cf. Kumar 2005). Consider, for example, one of the few occasions where 'division' or 'polarisation' is associated with objective inequalities.

Extract 10 **'Power to the poor'**

Caracas is perhaps the physical manifestation of the *divisions* that wrack this oil-rich nation of 26 million people.

The middle and upper classes tend to live in the flat, lower-lying areas – many of which look as if they have seen better days. The poor live in the barrios they have had to build for themselves on the surrounding slopes.

But while they live apart, both the poor and the middle classes, Chavistas and anti-Chavistas, complain about high levels of crime and a serious housing shortage.

('Venezuela: A nation divided', 27 November 2006,
emphasis added)

In the third paragraph of Extract 10 it is suggested that class differences do not translate into divergent concerns, but rather these concerns are shared by all. There is both a class-based explanation for Chavez's support, with the 'poor' more likely to be 'Chavistas', and its denial through a suggested disjuncture between class position and experience of hardship. The 'division' is affirmed in the description of respective neighbourhoods and undermined in that problems span the divide. Furthermore, according to the second paragraph, it is also areas where middle and upper classes live that 'have seen better days'. People come together in a shared experience which transcends class division.

The same contradictory theme is expressed in a section of an article ('Venezuela's Waiting Game' 22 February 2004) which has been describing the tense lead-up to the referendum of April 2004.

Extract 12

[...]the atmosphere is already turning ugly.

Decline and disorder

It is certainly not what the international community was hoping for when *all sides* signed up to the referendum process as far back as May last year.

That was after nearly *two years of violent political turmoil*.

First a coup that almost toppled President Chavez. And then a two-month-long national strike organised by the opposition. The government survived but the economy was brought to its knees.

These upheavals have left Venezuelans deeply divided. When Hugo Chavez was elected in a landslide five years ago, he offered a vision of a *more just society that would bring people together*.

Somewhere along the line, that dream turned sour.

President Chavez blames a wealthy, self-interested elite who refuse to give up any of their considerable political and economic clout.

His opponents believe it is the president who has accumulated too much power. They say he is a communist dictator in the mould of the Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

What is clear is that *everyone is worse off* than they were a few years ago.

(22 February 2004, emphasis added)

Rather than having brought 'all sides' 'together' in a positive sense of reconciliation, there have been 'upheavals' which have 'left Venezuelans divided', such that a negative bringing together has taken place through 'the economy' being undermined and 'everyone' being 'worse off'. The message could be said to carry the following moral: if through a reforming will one interferes with natural national unity, unintended consequences in the form of hardship for all may arise, and thus the reality of natural unity will reassert itself. Hence Chavez is at the same time both destroyer and, inadvertently, saviour of the nation. The notion that the reforms to the constitution were volunteered by the citizens, that participatory democracy might empower a traditionally excluded class, is largely absent.

FAMILIAL BEHAVIOUR AND THE NATION

If inherent national unity represents a priori reality and a rational order, and yet there is mass popular departure from this reality through ‘polarization’, then we have a picture of a nation at odds with itself. This notion is worth considering in more detail through looking at a longer article, ‘Crunch times for Venezuelans’ (14 August 2004).

To take the two final sections (entitled respectively, ‘Years of Conflict’ and ‘Divisive’), the nation-as-family metaphor (Kumar 2005; Lakoff 1995; Pan, Lee, Chan et al. 2001) works to emphasize the fundamentally foreign and destructive status of the divisions, opposed to the ‘shared’ interests of the national family. ‘Years of Conflict’ tells the story of how one person’s support for Chavez led him to neglect his friend (Sandra Sierra) who was ‘confronted’ by Chavez supporters. ‘Divisive’ tells of how ‘politics’, and especially Chavez, has caused the break-up of families.

To the extent that individuals who make up a family or friendship relation are likely to share a similar social position in society, this can again help rule out any potential material basis to the fracture – thus helping to connote the strange, out-of-the-blue and irrational manifestation of division. The notion of the conflict appearing as if out of nowhere is well expressed in the suggestion of ‘physical violence’ ‘erupting’ spontaneously, unexpectedly, certainly not as a natural consequence of deep material inequality. In this sense it is redolent of the account of the unexpected ascendancy of Chavez.

It is useful to compare this pattern to Burke’s discussion of the ‘non-economic “cause” ’ of national disturbances, and the ideological refusal

[...] to consider internal political conflict on the basis of conflicting interests. [...] People so dislike the idea of internal division that, where there is a real internal division, their dislike can easily be turned against the man or group who would so much as *name* it, let alone proposing to act upon it. Their natural and justified resentment against internal division itself, is turned against the diagnostician who states it as a *fact*. This diagnostician, it is felt, is the *cause* of the disunity he named.

([1939] 1984: 70–71 Original emphasis)

A particular version of crowd psychology is in play in the BBC reports here. Chavez, it seems, is responsible for fostering a generalized delusion which is manifested in the form of irrational and unnatural acts, motivated by a kind of madness. People, it is implied, could not by themselves act as they do. The statement, ‘We did not perceive of our society as being so divided that you couldn’t talk to or understand those on the other side of the political spectrum’ by a source in the article suggests a realization of the alien state of mind which this communication gulf represents. The ‘we’ operates here as an exclusionary metonym for the nation – certainly ‘we’ does not include the poor and ignores the history of human rights abuses outlined above. It seems people would not be in this state if it were not for Chavez. We can apply the same points to the first four lines of the article, where it is ‘extreme emotions’ which are ‘tearing’ the ‘country apart’. Such ‘emotions’ reflect the destructive influence of Chavez, rather than self-determining political actors.

Interestingly, the claim made by Sandra Sierra in the ‘Years of Conflict’ section that ‘[i]t was like he’d completely forgotten we were best friends’ suggests not that the state of being ‘best friends’ was now destroyed and

non-existent, but rather he (in his alien mindset) had 'forgotten' its ongoing existence. Similarly, one might say, it is as if Venezuelans had been made to 'forget' that they are part of the same national family. At the same time that Chavez may be trying to make people forget their essence, the essence is so strong that Chavez cannot eradicate it entirely. Indeed because of the resilience of the nation, his attempts to unsettle relations remind Venezuelans of their real, shared national interests. The 'turmoil' has taken its toll on things – whether 'the economy' or personal 'relationships' – which are shared, with its negative effects transcending class.

Without this realization we have a portrait of collective self-alienation due to mass amnesia. The image of self-alienation is represented in the suggestion of in-fighting between formally equivalent national citizens (Chavez's 'fiery rhetoric has set Venezuelan against Venezuelan'). This account brings to mind Anderson's (1991) discussion of how nationalist consciousness is able to retrospectively construct past conflicts between combatants sharing no common national bonds in the 'reassuring' terms of fratricide. The invention of the 'American Civil War' by its victors is one of the examples offered. In this eternalizing discourse, regardless of what happens, the antagonists will always be brothers, just as in the imaginative horizon of the BBC reports they will always be Venezuelans. The significance of the reports, however, is their suggestion of the exogenous nature of the violence between Venezuelan brothers.

Any possibility of understanding the situation as a rational, collective political response to historical conditions is obliterated by the clear identification of the Bolivarian movement as an unruly mob reacting to, and led by, the 'totalitarian autocrat'. The 'mob' constitutes the threat to the basic values of the nation, yet in the BBC reports it is both pro- and anti-Chavez collectives that manifest the primitive crowd psychology under the disorientating influence of Chavez. Again, neither 'side' can be judged by the content of their politics as they do not really know what they are doing. This contrasts with people demonstrating 'remembered' rational national consciousness, and who are certainly not 'moved by base emotions'. In fact the only element of the article that lends itself to judgement of the 'sides' is the photographic element. The sides are represented in two of the images anchored in the text, as noted above.

CONCLUSION

BBC News Online's reporting on Venezuela has clear flaws in terms of its own editorial guidelines. It is clear that the BBC's interpretation of the situation is underpinned by a particular – and discredited – national history, the exceptionalism thesis. This selective use of history – reminiscent of the BBC journalists' documentaries about Britain mentioned earlier on – cannot provide the organization with the conceptual framework with which to understand the present.

Furthermore, the BBC's more general liberal nationalist worldview prevents comprehension of the fundamental basis of the conflicts perceived by its journalists. As the focus on national well-being masks the fundamental class divisions that have animated Venezuelan politics and social life for many decades, those class divisions cannot themselves become part of the explanatory framework.

Whilst the commitments shown in the BBC's Editorial Guidelines are laudable, they seem not to have been achieved in this instance. 'The truth of what

has happened' is not comprehensible in the here-and-now. Truth, like facts, has history. Certainly it appears that the BBC's reports have not been committed to reflecting 'all significant strands of opinion by exploring the range and conflict of views'. And perhaps the most significant problem is that its attempt to be 'even handed' masks the inequitable basis of the situation itself.

We are left trying to understand why, in a practical sense, such bias has been observed in BBC News Online's coverage of Venezuela. Whilst the role of a liberal nationalist ideology does seem to explain the emphases in the coverage, the notion of relative autonomy and the journalist-as-agent leaves us with something of a gap in the study. The next stage will investigate the practical activity of BBC journalists and editors covering Venezuela.

Hardy suggests that in respect of Venezuela, news audiences tend to be given 'the perspective of an international correspondent [...] who works in a downtown office building of an opposition newspaper and lives in an apartment in a wealthy neighborhood' (Hardy 2007: 5). Indeed, the BBC's accommodation for their correspondents is in the exclusive Alta Mira area of Caracas. This arrangement is unsurprising given the crime rate in Caracas. Crucially, this arrangement means the lived experience and social networks (and thereby trusted sources of information) of correspondents tend to be within middle-class communities. It is also worth noting the role of stringers working in Caracas, who were instrumental in painting a particular picture of the 2002 coup given access problems and resource limitations at the BBC (personal correspondence with Caracas correspondents); they are also largely drawn from the private media organizations in Venezuela. 'Venezuela: A nation divided' gives an indication of how this restricted pool can colour reporting. In the article, Caracas stands in for the whole of Venezuela; moreover, the divisions are expressed in vox pops taken in Alta Mira, Las Mercades and Chacao, which are the three most exclusive neighbourhoods in Caracas and can be traversed on foot in less than an hour.

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